

Despite being so isolated and rough, the Koyukuk region was known as the friendliest place in Alaska.

"The remoteness and difficulty of the Koyukuk camp have engendered a feeling of comradeship amongst the miners that is not found, I think, in any other camp..."

— Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, 1917

For some, gold mining eventually became as much a lifestyle as trapping and hunting. Those who struck it rich left the Koyukuk, giving their claims to others. About half the population did not mine at all, but provided support services for the settlement—hauling supplies, running roadhouses, hunting game, teaching children. Eventually,

"the community... meant more to most of those people than the dribblets of gold that allowed them to stay on as members of the community."

— William E. Brown, Historian

Following the early Koyukuk gold rushes, interest in the region did not end. When the price of gold rose in the 1930s and again in the 1970s and 1980s, mining in the area intensified. The Koyukuk continues to lure gold seekers today. The promise of adventure and the possibility of hitting the mother lode still captivates the imagination. As long as the mountains and creeks of the Brooks Range continue to hold their hidden treasures, miners will be drawn to this remote and rugged land.

"My fortune is in the ground. How much my claims are worth, I cannot say, but no one could buy me out for \$100,000. No! I dream of millions."

— August "Deep Hole" Tobin, known as the Stubborn Swede, in a letter to his wife, January 1900.

THE SEARCH FOR GOLD

along the

KOYUKUK RIVER



Adventures in the Past Series, No. 4



Please contact us for more information:

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Front Cover

Many prospectors caught unprepared by the early freeze-up of 1898 spent the winter in small camps on the banks of the Koyukuk River and its tributaries. J.J. Ewing, shown in his tent in Bergman on April 27, 1899, survived temperatures as low as 60° below zero.

Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B89.24.261, Anchorage Museum of History and Art

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With the discovery of gold in 1906 at Nolan Creek, the richest strike in the area, a new surge of people filled the valley. During the first five years of production, this strike produced more than \$800,000 in gold. A resident described the area in a letter to the *Alaska-Yukon Magazine* in 1907:

“Coldfoot is a clean, healthy and quiet town. There is neither jail nor church in Coldfoot. We have one store and one road-house. The post office and recorder’s office are in the same building. Fashions do not change with the seasons in Coldfoot, but there is many a brave heart beneath a blue jumper.”

The writer encouraged other prospectors and their families to come north, saying, “In this country, one may live close to nature and be freer from care than in any part of our vast domain.” But Coldfoot was destined to die.

The town of Wiseman sprang up near the Nolan Creek strike and soon became the mining hub. Over the next several years, some cabins and even the schoolhouse and post office were sledged up the river to Wiseman, leaving Coldfoot virtually abandoned. A few folks, however, did remain. One resident, Jim Murphy, found the deserted cabins useful. He burned them as firewood.

By 1915, the Koyukuk Mining District produced approximately \$2,900,000 worth of gold, making it one of Alaska’s richest mining districts. Three hundred people lived in the area.

When World War I broke out, war-time inflation and a desire to serve in the military drove many miners outside the Koyukuk, and once again, interest in the region waned. In the mid-1920s, 135 miners still worked their claims. Construction of the Alaska Railroad from Anchorage to Fairbanks helped extend the shipping season. Freight barged from Nenana via the Nenana and Yukon Rivers now reached the Koyukuk a month earlier in the spring and a month later in the fall, although costs remained high. By 1937, 110 people lived in Wiseman, and the numbers continued to dwindle. Today, only a handful of residents live year-round in Wiseman.



Photo courtesy of Jack Moermond

Originally built in 1910 by the Northern Commercial Company after its first building burned, this historic building is now home to the Wiseman Trading Company. June 1997.





TRANSPORTATION

From Bettles, the Koyukuk River became so shallow miners had to use scows—flat-bottomed boats—pulled by horses or poled by hand. Carrying six to nine tons of supplies, scows crept slowly upstream. Crew members considered 15 miles a day an exemplary pace. Poling boats carried 1,000 to 1,500 pounds apiece and required three to five men to pole the boat up the Koyukuk.

Those who dug in and pursued their dreams found mining to be an exhausting and expensive pursuit. Freight cost about \$135/ton from Seattle to Bettles, and Bettles still lay 75 miles from the gold fields. Transportation costs for this final leg of the journey up the Koyukuk River were more than double the cost of the first leg. Since supplies were scarce, miners had little choice but to take one month a year to travel to Bettles to collect provisions that would carry them through the remaining 11 months.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey, Maddren, A.G. 20

FREIGHTING COSTS APRIL 10, 1903

| Route | Miles | Cost/ton |
|------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Seattle to St. Michael | 2,550 | \$30 |
| St. Michael to Bergman | 1,070 | \$70 |
| Bergman to Bettles | 80 | \$35 |
| Bettles to Coldfoot | 60 | \$202 |
| Coldfoot to the mines | | \$200 - \$400 |

Prices remained high in the Koyukuk Mining District. In 1903, Mining Commissioner D.A. McKenzie told a government committee that miners couldn't afford to bring their families, so few planned to stay. Most wanted to find their fortune, then move on. A bag of flour cost \$11.23 in Coldfoot, he testified. The same bag of flour cost \$1.50 in Nome. In 1902 when gold fever struck in Fairbanks, many miners drifted south to try their luck there.

COLDFOOT IS BORN

By 1899, a cluster of cabins had sprung up on the banks of Slate Creek. The following year, a wave of prospectors reached this little settlement, got "cold feet" and fled, prompting the locals to change the name from Slate Creek to Coldfoot. When two stores opened in 1902, the miners could purchase goods locally rather than spend precious time traveling 60 miles to Bettles. By the end of the year, Coldfoot was a full-fledged town, with one gambling hall, two roadhouses, a post office, and seven saloons.

They struck gold up Bettles and Wiseman that year. Lots of people were traveling in that direction... The first thing I remember is being tied to Mama's back. She was packing me around Gold Creek mining camp, thirty miles out of Wiseman. I saw those miners working. They work and never stop, no matter how hot the sun. They don't think about mosquitoes, nothing. They just want that gold and get it, too.

— Oscar Nictune, Kobuk Eskimo born 1901, *Oscar Nictune, Sr.: A Biography*

Gold! Once discovered in the mountains, rivers and creeks of the Brooks Range, this magical metal lured hundreds of hopeful prospectors eager to fulfill their dreams of wealth and adventure. Gold rushes in the Klondike and at Nome may be more well-known, but the gold rush up the Koyukuk River, deep in Alaska's Interior, can lay claim to being one of the oldest and most remote gold mining booms in Alaska. This isolated country swelled with an onrush of gold seekers not once, but twice. It became perhaps the most grueling and expensive place to seek a fortune. It also left the most lasting legacy—one more valuable than gold. The stalwart miners who persevered and the residents who supported them with supplies and companionship developed a sense of community so strong that it even touched those who were just visiting.

"One never sees poverty, sickness, or real distress. No one is quite without funds so long as the rest have any. It is a country that one can never forget and never cease loving. I seem to leave my heart here when I go out."

— 1910 newspaper article

Koyukuk miners rarely struck the kind of paydirt they initially sought. Instead, they discovered the gold of friendship, surely a fortune in its own right.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey, Schrader, F.C. 402

Two miners pan for gold upstream from Coldfoot on Myrtle Creek, the site of the first major strike along the Koyukuk River. 1899.



Few people ventured north of the Yukon River into Koyukuk country before 1885. It wasn't until Lieutenant Henry T. Allen, an adventurous, 26-year-old army officer, led an expedition up the winding Koyukuk River that a handful of prospectors began to trickle into the area. By 1890, a few lucky miners had found gold on the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River. Three years later at Tramway Bar, miners finally hit the first paying strike.

Word began to spread—there's gold on the Koyukuk! By now, the gold rush to the Klondike was in full swing and few claims remained for latecomers. Stragglers began looking for somewhere else to find their fortune. With rumors running wild, it didn't take long for them to home in on the Koyukuk.

"You never saw so many heartbroken, discontented people as there are here [in Dawson]... Men here are doing everything they can to get out. You ought to hear their tales of woe; it is heart rending. I am glad we have some other place in view. We still think we will find the Eldorado. Everyone we see who has been on the Koyukuk River says it is good and we are sure to hit it."

— letter by T.T. Barbour, June 26, 1898

Newcomers sailed north to St. Michael, chugged up the Yukon River by steamboat, then journeyed by boat or on foot up the Koyukuk River. Miners from Dawson came by dog team, traveling on the frozen Chandalar River. More than a thousand hopeful fortune-seekers rushed into the area, setting up a series of temporary towns—clusters of shacks with names like Peavy, Arctic City and Bettles.

Steamboats like the *Illinois* burned 40 to 50 cords of wood every day. June 14, 1899.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B84.29.293, Anchorage Museum of History and Art



The Koyukuk Gold Rush may not have fulfilled the many dreams of gold, but one thing it did do was change lives. Before European contact in the late 1800s, both Indians and Eskimos lived in small bands in the Brooks Range and along the Koyukuk River, traveling seasonally to where food was available. When dozens of towns and mining camps sprang up along the Koyukuk in 1898, a new way of life was introduced and change was inevitable.

As prospectors and businessmen flooded the region in search of riches, Natives also saw opportunities—a chance to profit from trade and employment. Natives migrated toward the new settlements and began pursuing more cash-producing activities, such as trapping for furs, guiding prospectors, transporting supplies, and hunting and fishing for the miners. Many aspects of the Natives' traditional semi-nomadic, subsistence lifestyle were left behind. Disease and a decline in the caribou population also contributed to the drastic changes taking place in the lives of Natives.

Among the miners, Natives soon became known and respected for their generosity and abilities. On more than one occasion, Natives rescued ill-prepared and inexperienced prospectors from difficult and sometimes life-threatening situations.

"...the wind upset them and they lost a good part of the supplies in that boat, and after a narrow escape had landed bottom side up near this Indian village.

The natives, thinking they had lost all they had, came to them with dried fish and other eatables, offering to give them to them."

— Thomas Moore

Natives became an integral part of the new communities along the Koyukuk River and shared much in common with their white neighbors—all lived in cabins or sod houses, all hunted and fished for food, and all had to pay bills at the trading post. Together, both Natives and non-Natives learned to survive in their new homes, developing a semi-subsistence lifestyle that still exists today.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey, Schrader, F.C. 335

For thousands of years, Natives found everything they needed to survive in the harsh and often unforgiving land of the Arctic. As Natives concentrated into villages, subsistence activities became more difficult, leading to a greater dependence on trading post goods. 1899.



Despite the harsh conditions, miners made the best of the situation. Some lived in small camps on the creeks looking for gold, while others stayed in more substantial towns such as Bettles, Bergman or Arctic City, waiting for spring to come. Saloons sprang up, and the town of Bergman even offered a string band and boxing matches for entertainment.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B89.24.132, Anchorage Museum of History and Art

After 5 rounds against J.C. Cox of Los Angeles, California, Ed Kelly of Denver, Colorado walked away with the \$250 prize. March 31, 1899.

Without a single strike that winter to lift their spirits, even those prospectors who made it to the gold fields found their dreams of gold fading like the disappearing sun. As winter dragged on and morale plummeted, plans to escape the treacherous conditions became more urgent. In spring, many of these miners joined the exodus. Nearly dying from scurvy that winter, Captain J.D. Winchester recalled later,

"After I left the old shack I never turned back to take a last look, for there was nothing to see or remember about it but suffering. I got on the boat and we pushed away..."

By the end of 1899, only 100 hardy souls remained in the Koyukuk Valley.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B89.24.184, Anchorage Museum of History and Art

After fruitless digging for gold up the Alatna River, photographer Jasper Wyman returned to Bergman in late March. This photo entitled "Yukon Cabin Sports" was one of many taken while waiting for the ice to go out. April 2, 1899.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B89.24.183, Anchorage Museum of History and Art

Bergman String Band, April 8, 1899.



In 1898 a sudden freeze-up, not uncommon in Koyukuk country, provided a sub-zero wake-up call for most of the adventurers. Almost overnight, 68 steamers and their 900 passengers were frozen in place for the winter's duration. About half of the disillusioned miners grabbed whatever rations they could carry and escaped to the Yukon River via dogsled. The 350 who stayed were broke, but survived with rations left behind by others. When the ice melted at breakup, most of the prospectors fled, turning their settlements into ghost towns. Bitterly disappointed, many of these miners left the country never having begun their search for gold.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B89.24.236, Anchorage Museum of History and Art



The *Aurora*, one of many steamers trapped in the ice in 1898, served as the winter quarters for the stranded miners. Small camps or towns were often established where the steamers grounded. April 20, 1899.

Hastily built in 1898 to accommodate the flood of prospectors, "new" Arctic City appeared practically overnight. A camp of only 28 men and their tents in August 1898, Arctic City boasted 20 cabins, a saloon, a dancehall and a sawmill by March 1899. They even had electric lights to brighten the gloom of the long, dark winter. As miners abandoned the area in the spring, Arctic City died as quickly as it was born, having lived not more than a year.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B89.24.54, Anchorage Museum of History and Art



DELIVERING THE GOODS



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey, Schrader, F.C. 845
In 1898, Bergman was the last place on the Koyukuk River to purchase supplies before heading into the gold fields.

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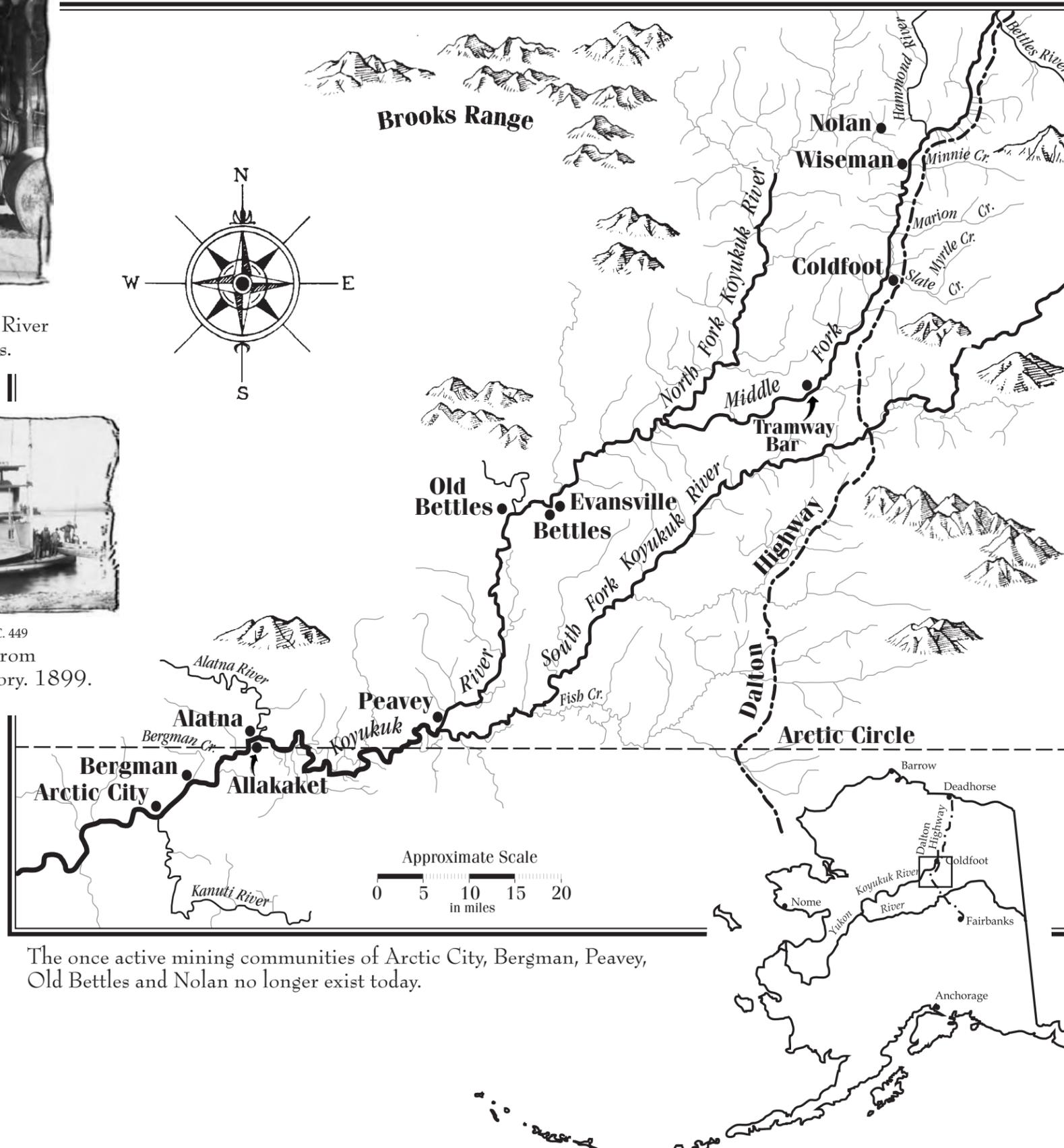


Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey, Schrader, F.C. 449
Shallow water prevented steamboats from penetrating deep into gold rush territory. 1899.



Photo courtesy of the Roger Kaye Collection, 93-72-04, APR Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Poling boats was one of the few alternatives for hauling supplies to points beyond steamboat navigation.



The once active mining communities of Arctic City, Bergman, Peavey, Old Bettles and Nolan no longer exist today.



Photo courtesy of the O'Loane Collection, 89-195-47, APR Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

During winter, prospectors relied on dog teams to transport their goods.



Photo courtesy of the Jasper Wyman Collection, B84.29.293, Anchorage Museum of History and Art
Native Indians and Eskimos served as guides and helped transport goods to the mines. May 8, 1899.